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AUTHOR	Deason, Melissa; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The role that rural libraries could have in increasing the awareness level of disability issues in their communities and in expanding opportunities for the disabled was studied in a survey of 401 rural Indiana and Iowa libraries. A review of the literature associated with rural rehabilitation services suggests that the two crucial barriers to the delivery of such services are awareness of and access to disability-related information. A combined return rate of 49.1% indicated that many rural libraries serve a number of clients from farms and ranches and that they generally serve a small population, with relatively few books in circulation. Slightly over 87% were associated with a Library Network System that allows sharing of resources, a mechanism that can increase the information available without increasing costs. Just under 59% of these rural libraries were wheelchair accessible and only 25% reported plans to improve accessibility. Most offered little in the way of services or materials for the disabled. While rural libraries in Iowa and Indiana do not appear to be meeting the needs of the disabled at present, they do have the potential, primarily through resource sharing, to become places where the rural disabled can gain access to new information. An accessibility checklist is attached. (SLD)

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Rural Public Libraries - A Resource for the Disabled

Purdue University
Breaking New Ground Center
1146 Agriculture Engineering Bldg.
Lafayette, IN 47907-1146

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PLOWSHARES #15

Special *Breaking New Ground* Technical Report

Rural Public Libraries - A Resource for the Disabled

Melissa Deason
Information Specialist
Breaking New Ground

Ed Kirkpatrick
Editorial Assistant
Breaking New Ground

Bill Field
Director
Breaking New Ground

INTRODUCTION

"I've worn glasses since I was six years old, and of course, they called me four-eyes and a lot of other things, too. That's hard on a boy. It makes him lonely, and it gives him an inferiority complex. And, he has a hard time overcoming it.

Of course, we didn't know what an inferiority complex was in those days. But you can overcome it. You've got to fight for everything you do. You've got to be above those calling you names, and you've got to do more work than they do. But it usually comes out all right in the end.

I always had my nose stuck in a book... Of course, the main reason you read a book is to get a better insight into the people you're talking to. There were about three thousand books in the library downtown, and I guess I read them all, including the encyclopedias. I'm embarrassed to say that I remembered what I read, too." *

— Harry S. Truman

Thus, a small, rural Missouri library had a significant impact on a young boy with poor eyesight who went on to become President of our nation. Throughout this country, libraries have provided easy access to past events and the experience of others.

The presence of these facilities, with their open doors and broad collections of diverse thought and information, have helped ensure a free and knowledgeable society. It is no coincidence that when a culture disintegrates into some form of tyranny, public libraries are soon closed, books burned, and the dissemination of information is carefully controlled. Access to knowledge is strengthening, and knowing the truth is liberating.

Rural Americans have much to gain from strong community libraries. People with disabilities especially need to have quality access to the resources available through a well maintained library.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possible role that rural libraries could have in increasing the awareness level of disability issues in their communities and in expanding opportunities for the disabled. **

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING INFORMATION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

A review of the literature associated with rural rehabilitation services suggests there are two crucial barriers to the delivery of such services. These are awareness of and access to disability-related information. Rural residents are generally not aware of the resources and services that are designed to help them. Consequently, they could not access these even if they did exist in their community.

This public library, located in the small (pop. 2,500) rural Indiana county seat of Delphi, has an entrance with steps that is common to many libraries constructed in the early part of the century.

It is easy for urban residents to take for granted their ready access to information of all kinds. Television, multi-language radio stations, newspapers, magazines, billboards, movies, posters, social organizations, and frequent contacts with others all contribute to enhanc-

* From *Plain Speaking*, by Merle Miller. The Berkley Publishing Group. New York, 1974.

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ing the dissemination of information for them. In many rural areas, however, there may be only a single television station and only one or two radio stations within easy reception range. Also, less sophisticated and less frequently used channels of information may be available.

This isolation from information is, even in the present electronic age, a result of the geographical scattering of persons in remote rural areas. When people in these areas are disabled, their problems are compounded further by the isolation.

UTILIZATION OF RURAL LIBRARIES

Recently, the Delphi library was remodeled to place a ramp at the side of the building, making access easier. An elevator was also installed inside the building.

As part of a National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) study, the Breaking New Ground Resource Center at Purdue University conducted a survey of rural public libraries. In addition to determining the potential role of these facilities in the rehabilitation service delivery process, the survey sought to determine:

1. Whether or not persons with disabilities used rural libraries.
2. The level of accessibility of rural libraries.
3. What types of information and resources were available to persons with disabilities.
4. Whether or not rural libraries had plans to improve or enhance accessibility and services to persons with disabilities.
5. How rural libraries promoted their services and resources.

SURVEY METHODS

To conduct the survey, 401 rural public libraries were selected from Indiana (N = 201) and Iowa (N = 200). Both states were involved with the NIDRR funded project and were homes for two active programs providing rehabilitation services to rural and farm families. Libraries serving the 200 smallest population areas in each state were selected based on the premise that the smaller libraries are more likely to serve rural areas.

Many rural communities have new or remodeled libraries. This new library building, located at Monticello, Indiana, had its grand opening in May 1992, and serves a city of 5,500 but an expanded community of 20,000.

Each of the 401 libraries received a mailed packet that included a survey, cover-letter, a pre-addressed stamped envelope, and information about Indiana's Breaking New Ground Outreach Program or the Iowa Easter Seal Society's FaRM program, depending on where the libraries were located.

RESULTS

A 49.1% combined return rate (56.7% from Indiana, 41.5% from Iowa) was obtained ten weeks after the initial mailing of the surveys. Following are the results obtained from the 197 respondents for survey questions 5 through 15. (Questions #1-4 were used to obtain respondent's name, address, name of library and county.) Percentages represent combined data from both states.

Many libraries have some parking near the building reserved for those with physical disabilities.

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5. Do you consider the population you serve to be rural, urban or mixed?

rural	40.1%
urban	5.1
mixed	53.8
no response	1.0

6. What percent of your clients do you estimate live on farms or ranches?

less than 5%	14.2%
5 to 10%	16.2
10-15%	20.8
more than 15%	47.2
no response	1.5

Curb cuts make access from the parking area much easier for wheelchair users.

7. Approximately what size population do you serve?

4,000 or less	60.9%
4,001 to 8,000	10.7
8,001 or more	26.9
no response	1.5

8. What is your approximate circulation per year?

50,000 or less	68.0%
50,001 to 100,000	10.7
100,001 or more	17.3
no response	4.1

9. Do you operate a bookmobile?

Yes	10.7%
No	88.2
no response	1.1

10. Do you have clients who are wheelchair users, mobility impaired, visually impaired, hearing impaired?

	Yes
wheelchair users	34.0%
mobility impaired	48.7
visually impaired	60.4
hearing impaired	46.2

Entrances of adequate width are essential to the library patron who must use a wheelchair. Newer libraries may have automatic doors.

11. Is your library wheelchair accessible?

Yes	58.9%
No	40.5
no response	0.6

a. If yes, how many years accessible?

< 1 year	7.1%
1-5 years	17.3
6-10 years	15.2
> 10 years	18.8

b. If yes, in which ways accessible?

parking	26.9%
sloped sidewalk curbs	29.9
library entrance	54.3
restrooms	31.5
meeting rooms	36.0
all floors levels	43.1

c. Are there plans to make your facility more accessible?

Yes	25.4%
No	65.6
no response	9.0

12. Which of the following services does your library provide for disabled patrons?

large print books	87.3%
talking books	60.9
a. records	22.8
b. cassettes	49.7
c. CD-ROM	3.0
record player	28.4
cassette player	44.7
CD player	5.6
VCR	36.5
videos	67.0

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Wide aisles make access to books much easier.

headphones or special room for in library listening	20.3
braille books	8.1
v-tech machine for the hearing impaired	3.6
TDD machine for the hearing impaired	4.1
homebound delivery service	52.8
adaptive aids/ devices/toys	3.6
other	4.0

Other responses included van service to nursing homes and some small schools; sign language books and tapes; hospital visitation programs; closed caption machine; books mailed to home bound, postage paid both directions; large lighted magnifier.

13. Which published resources dealing with rehabilitation services are available?

Accent on Living Buyers Guide	27.4%
Webster's Medical Desk Dictionary	26.4
Encyclopedia of Association of National Organizations in the U.S.	20.8
Technology for Independent Living	1.1
Enrichments for Better Living	0.6
Paraplegic News	0.6
Other	5.6

Others included: *Better Homes and Garden Family Medical Guide; Red Notebook for the Deaf; PDR nursing manuals; Sourcebook for the Disabled by Hofman and Hale; An Easier Way; Health Care USA; American Rehabilitation; Work Life; Indiana Directory for the Handicapped; Access; Medical Guides*, etc.

14. Is your library associated with the Library Network System?

Yes	87.8%
No	10.5
no response	1.7

15. How does your library publicize its available services? (Top three listed.)

local newspaper	92.9%
window displays	42.6
presentations at local events or meetings	34.0

Others included newsletters, radio, television, handouts, school paper, bulletin boards, word of mouth, signs in yards, displays within library, bookmarks, community events booth, highway billboard, public access cable TV channel, postings in local businesses.

DISCUSSION

From the responding libraries, it was determined that slightly more than half of both the Indiana and Iowa libraries serve a mixture of rural and urban populations, while 36.0% of the respondents in Indiana and 45.0% in Iowa serve only a rural population. When asked to estimate the percentage of patrons living on farms and ranches, 47.2% of all the librarians responded that more than 15% of their patrons did indeed live on farms or ranches. Considering the vast numbers of rural patrons these statistics represent, it becomes quite clear that these public libraries would be logical sites for the dissemination of information regarding disability awareness and rehabilitation service, especially for their rural patrons.

Libraries constructed or remodeled in recent years have ample space at the end of the aisles for wheelchair users.

In addition, the survey shows that these libraries serve relatively small populations and have a small number of volumes in circulation. Perhaps this allows rural librarians the opportunity to better know their patrons' needs. However, the small operating size of rural libraries also causes difficulties in the ability to provide rehabilitation services and information because of budgetary and space restraints which are inherent to smaller rural public libraries. One encouraging factor, however, is the fact that 87.8% of

Shelf height sometimes presents a problem, but here a user finds he can reach the top one.

the libraries were associated with a Library Network System which allows librarians access to resources and information from the other, often larger libraries. This gives libraries availability to many resources without increasing allocations of money and space.

Physical access to the library was of significant interest in that it was a determining factor concerning the potential utilization by local residents with disabilities. Only 58.9% of the libraries reportedly were wheelchair accessible (Indiana 50.0%, Iowa 71.0%). And, when looking at the specific ways in which the libraries were accessible, it is clear that most libraries are not completely accessible. Accessible parking and sidewalks, which would often be the first hurdles encountered by a person with a mobility impairment during a trip to a library, are reportedly the accessibility features least commonly found in the rural libraries of Indiana and Iowa.

Once inside the library, few in wheelchairs would be able to access restrooms, meeting rooms, and/or all levels of the library. Only 25% of the responding libraries reported plans to improve their accessibility. Additionally, very few libraries

New and remodeled libraries most often have carrels for patrons. One or two of these should be specifically designed for patrons with disabilities.

surveyed offered Bookmobile Services, a service which could make library services accessible to many in more isolated areas.

After disabled patrons have gained access to the library, it is important that there are materials (books, audio visual aids and other assistive devices) specially designed and available for the person with physical disabilities. Librarians were asked to report the services their libraries provide for disabled patrons. Large print books and videotapes were reported to be most common and adaptive aids, devices and toys were least common. Other services mentioned by respondents included offering: van service to nursing homes and small schools, sign language books and videotapes, weekly hospital visit programs, closed caption machines,

Usually, at least one computer terminal station is reserved for use by those with disabilities.

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In recent years, talking books have become popular and are widely used.

Elderly citizens and persons with diminished eyesight find large print books helpful.

lighted page magnifiers, and books mailed to the homebound with postage paid both directions.

Resources such as journals, magazines, supply catalogs or medical references that would give information about disability-related issues were also in short supply.

An important element to the successful use of any library is publicity. It is especially important, yet often difficult, for rural libraries to make their services, materials and resources known to the public. In this survey, local newspapers, window displays and presentations at meetings and events were reported to be the publicity methods most used by rural public libraries. The survey did not ascertain by which means any of the libraries tried to publicize their services to patrons with disabilities.

ON-SITE VISITS

In addition to the survey, some 12 rural libraries were visited to gain additional information. (The photos in this paper were taken during those visits.) The facilities ranged from being completely inaccessible with few services for persons with disabilities to brand new facilities that welcomed everyone. Several of the older libraries, however, were developing plans to come into compliance with the American Disability Act (ADA), with the primary barrier being the lack of financial resources.

Wash rooms in today's newer libraries are built with accessibility in mind.

One observation made during the on-site visits was the inconsistency between the perception of the librarians concerning what is accessible and what is actually accessible. For example, a librarian may conclude that their facility is now accessible because a curb cut and ramp to the front door has been installed. However, once inside, the person in a wheelchair may find that half of the book collection is on a second floor that is not accessible or that the aisles between the shelves are too narrow.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors were extremely pleased with the high rate of response to the study (49.1%) and feels that this reflects a high level of interest from the librarians to the subject of library services being made accessible to persons with disabilities. In this survey, we set out to find whether rural public libraries could be a viable means of disseminating information to disabled individuals living in rural areas as well as ascertaining the types of services and resources already available for the disabled in the rural public libraries of Indiana and Iowa.

The survey revealed that as far as being "user friendly," many rural public libraries falter in their service to disabled patrons. Currently, many are not completely, if at all accessible, and most offer little in the way of services or information for the disabled. Not only are there limited library materials to be used by disabled persons, but there are also limited resource materials to be used for learning about physical disabilities and disability-related issues. This creates another barrier for not only the person with a disability, but for family members and caregivers as well. Not having information or being aware that it even exists is at the root of the rural rehabilitation service delivery issue. Because a

person lives in an isolated area, they may not have access to or the awareness of information and services that could potentially reduce the impact (physical, emotional, economic, social) of their disability; thus, they often become even more isolated.

Our survey did turn up reason for optimism, however. The libraries participating in the survey did report that a substantial portion of their patrons do live in rural areas on farms and ranches. Several of the currently inaccessible facilities reported future plans to make their libraries accessible and some were involved with implementing innovative methods for reaching the disabled (library mail service, bookmobile, and nursing home/hospital visits). Our survey was, however, conducted before the implementation of the ADA. Certainly many of these small libraries will now be looking into ways to comply with the regulations in spite of any budget difficulties. While many of these libraries will not have the funds to undertake major renovations, their staffs will need to rethink door and aisle widths; table, counter and drinking fountain heights; restroom accessibility, etc.

Drinking fountains at the proper height benefit those in wheelchairs. Some libraries have found installing a cup dispenser near the fountain works as well.

Most of the libraries surveyed were part of a Library Network System, and could, as a result, access information and materials from other libraries. Under a similar type of interlibrary loan program, materials are also usually available from the state library for use by patrons who are blind, visually impaired or deaf.

A few libraries now have TDD (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf) units available.

Finally, although not highly technical nor far-reaching, the libraries surveyed did have in place methods of publicizing their services and materials to their rural patrons.

While our survey found that rural public libraries in Indiana and Iowa were not great sources of information or technology for the disabled, we did discover that these libraries do have the potential to become places where disabled people who live in isolated rural places can come to gain access to new information. New information can lead to increased knowledge of their own disability, how to improve employment opportunities and independent living skills and of new services and resources which have the potential for reducing the impact of disability in their lives. Rural public libraries can be a means of getting this information to the rural disabled.

OUR THANKS AND APPRECIATION

We are indebted to Ed Bell of rural Hagerstown for his cooperation in serving as our photo subject at the Noblesville, Indiana, library. Also, our thanks to Dennis Lawson of the Wabash Valley Library Network, headquartered at Lafayette, Indiana, for his interest and helpfulness, and to librarians in other communities for their cooperation. Special thanks go to Susan Moses, a student in Purdue's Department of Child Development and Family Studies, for assisting with conducting the survey.

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ACCESSIBILITY CHECKLIST

Rural residents with disabilities should not assume that because their library is inaccessible that it needs to remain that way. The ADA gives you the right to have access and to be accommodated as much as is practically possible. To assist in doing a simple accessibility test of your local library, the following checklist is included.

1. Are parking spaces near an entrance especially marked "reserved" for the disabled?
2. Are there curb cuts or ramps that lead from the parking area?
3. Where there is a change in grade or steps has a ramp been installed with a grade of less than 1:12?
4. Do the ramps have rails on both sides?
5. Are all doors at least 36 to 38 inches wide?
6. Are entrance doors automatic or mounted to swing inward?
7. Are bookshelves, tables, card catalogs and other aisles set at least 42 inches apart to allow for wheelchair or walker passage?
8. Are floors constructed of non-slippery material?
9. Are card catalogs, references, magazines, and other common resources kept within 48 to 54 inches off the floor?
10. Are all levels of the library accessible by elevator or ramps?
11. Does library signage include enlarged and/or raised lettering or Braille?
12. Is there easy access to a public telephone? (Mounted 48 to 54 inches from the floor?)
13. Are drinking fountains mounted no more than 36 inches from the floor? Or are cup dispensers used?
14. Does the restroom have at least one stall that is wheelchair accessible?
15. Are sinks and faucets in the rest room operable with one hand and low enough for use by a person in a wheelchair?
16. Are the computers, microfiche readers and other equipment placed on tables which allow access by a person in a wheelchair?
17. Does the seating and furniture arrangement in the reading areas provide accommodation for a wheelchair user?
18. Is the checkout counter low enough to be accessible? (At least 36 inches long and a maximum of 36 inches high?)

Based on "ADA Accessibility Guidelines for Buildings and Facilities."
To obtain a complete set of the guidelines, contact:

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Civil Rights Division
Office on the Americans with Disabilities Act
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(202) 514-0301 (voice)
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